

TO ALL DVD STORES, WITH LOVE

Written by Leo Sok

While walking along Phnom Penh's Riverside, in the heart of the bubbling capital, I realize something obvious: cinema has completely disappeared from public spaces. I've lived in Cambodia for eight years. I've never seen the huge painted hoardings from the famous golden age, but I caught the final curtain lowering on the last of them: Ciné Lux in 2017. Friends have told me about their excitement while watching movies in the past—the hearts of the audience beating in unison with the characters, commentating, shouting, laughing, crying. Whether in front of a big screen without AC or huddled like fish around a cathode television at home with the whole family and the neighbors, “Time stopped for a film,” as my aunt remembers. When I came here in the new millennium, these celebrations were already over.

The most evident presence of cinema on the street was in DVD stores. I remember my astonishment when I discovered them during my first trip to Cambodia fifteen years ago. *It was legal to obtain illegal copies of films for less than a dollar?* Nothing like this existed where I grew up! It reminded me of the “video clubs” of my childhood where I could rent VHS tapes for a week, but better and cheaper. I could own many films, watch, and rewatch them on my own time. I was aware of the ethical issues of supporting artists through royalties, but as a cinema student with a job at McDonald's, I was shameless. Far away from the French New



Image by Jay Rosas

Wave, Hollywood, or Bollywood, I could drive my motorbike at night without a helmet and buy two beers, a pack of cigarettes, or a good film with a dollar! It was quite magical.

Near the corner of Street 144: a DVD store, Tai Hok Coffin Shop, and another DVD store. The one on the left was the best stocked with classic Westerns, box office films, or Turkmen independent movies. Of course, porn behind a velvet curtain at the back of the room. I loved the way the paper covers and backs of the original DVDs were carefully printed out and secured in their plastic pouches. The holy grail was the collector's box sets from the masters of the seventh art: the entire filmography of a director in a cardboard box for around ten or fifteen dollars! I swooped in to seize the Martin Scorsese, Michelangelo Antonioni, and Kim Ki-Duk boxes. They probably still stand fiercely upon my mother's DVD shelf in France.

Every time I visited Cambodia, I would return to my favorite store to buy DVDs fresh from the printer. Then, once I settled here,

I would sometimes go back there just to roam in the shop. When I lived in Paris, sitting on a red folding chair in the religious silence of a screening room to immerse myself in the lives of others was a weekly practice. But in Phnom Penh, most commercial movies projected in the multiplexes have not been to my taste. And since I'm too technophobic (some say lazy) to download movies myself, my DVD store was my best friend.

The owner was an efficient woman. Over time, she also started selling video files which we could order and pick up on our USB key for 2000 riels (50 cents USD). She even had a Telegram channel where she advertised new arrivals. It was this channel that she used to announce to her sorrowful customers that she had to close her business' doors. Today, her shop has become a grocery store, and the other DVD store a travel agency, but the coffin seller next door is still there. It's a more sustainable business...

I try my luck at the Russian market and find myself by the southeast corner in front of a bin, where I pick up the French classic *Quai des Brumes* (*Port of Shadows*, 1938) and the James Bond series. This is the last pirated DVD and CD store in the entire market.

"There were ten vendors here before," says Neath, the forty-three-year-old vendor, listing the names on her fingers. "After the Covid crisis, those who had managed to hold on closed shop or changed products."

Today, her sales are volatile. She cannot give an average figure, but she remembers her golden age twenty years ago. "It was forbidden to sell copies of Khmer films, but it was tolerated to sell foreign ones," she explains with a frown, still embarrassed



Soketa in her shop

despite the gray zone to operate somewhat freely. “The police raided us ten years ago and asked all merchants to sell original DVDs. But no one provided us with practical support to do so! Who was ready to pay ten dollars for a DVD? Nobody.”

I ask her how she used to select her wares. “I didn’t,” she replies. “I had a supplier in Malaysia who supplied the Thai, Vietnamese, and Cambodian markets.” Now, most of the DVDs she sells are five years old. She seems to evade the current MO of where her new pirated series, music, and films come from. “The fake ones are old foreign movies. I sell original Khmer discs,” she insists.

Did she watch the films she sold? “Sometimes. I would recommend them to my clients mostly based on the actors.” Neath’s predilections are action films; her favorite actors are Tom Cruise and Will Smith. But today, this mother of three children no longer has the free time to watch films at home nor the budget for the cinema with her family. She pauses to think about the last movie she watched. “Um, *Final Destination* (2000). It traumatized me, then I was too scared to drive on the road alone.” She laughs.

“Anyway, I work seven days a week and I’m worried about earning a living. Now that customers are watching movies online on streaming platforms or on YouTube, DVDs are dead.” Neath is trying to liquidate her stock before considering doing anything else. “I sell to the *echhay* (scavengers): 2000 riels per kilo!”

In Sorya Mall, one of the first shopping centers, the old floor for DVDs is haunting. The zone has been modernized into smaller little kiosks painted in all colors which are three-quarters empty. I feel relieved to find a young woman in a pink dress buzzing out of her tidy little store. “Yes, I am the last DVD vendor of the mall!” Soketa, 39, smiles.

She opened her shop ten years ago alongside a dozen other sellers. Some shut down as newer malls attracted their customers. The pandemic marked the last farewell. Soketa used to sell a lot of East Asian productions, but now she focuses on Hollywood movies and Oscar winners. “I became sharper. Most of my customers are regulars or foreigners with a certain level of education and taste,” she explains.

The conversation is interrupted by an old white man who asks for the Chinese movie, *Lust, Caution* (2007).

“Love caution?” asks Soketa.

“No, lust,” he grumbles.

“He had a strong accent.” Soketa blinks when he leaves. She retraces: “I learned English thanks to subtitles. I checked all the words that I didn’t know in the dictionary!”

Soketa is a cinephile driven by her love for actors, directors, and stories. When she was a kid, she frequented the movie theater of her rural hometown in Pursat. Movies there such as *Srey Metch Thum* (*The Girl of the Ripe Chili*)^o cost around 200 or 300 riels



Michelangelo Antonioni filmography boxset found in Soketa's shop. It had been bought when we went back.

per ticket. Later in Phnom Penh, she got some gigs on movie shootings as a gaffer. “I was paid with free tickets for Ciné Lux,” she jokes. She became a sales assistant at the major DVD shop, D-Center, before becoming her own boss.

She searches through her memory to share the name of her favorite movie. “It’s the story of a robot who has human feelings and is abducted by the government. There is a sad ending. I cried a lot,”[∞] she confides. “Today, customers ask for movies that sometimes have no story, no meaning at all. That’s why I do my best to advise them. I also recommend animated movies to parents who buy DVDs for car trips and educational movies to schools.”

The last vendor doesn’t seem too affected by the gloomy ambiance that surrounds her. Regulars continue to come to her. She sells online too, via delivery apps.

In front of her stand, there is a mixed selection of Blu-Rays, The original ones cost \$5 while the copies are \$2.50; regular pirated DVDs amount to \$1.50. She buys her stock from a local supplier, except for the Blu-Rays which come from Malaysia. Blank DVDs of more than 25 gigabytes can’t be found in Cambodia. Soketa seems to have found a fragile albeit decent business model.

“Today, cinema is less popular than before. The audience is mostly made of students. A lot of people have been hit hard by the economic crisis. They have no mental space for movies,” she analyzes. I hope that she’s not totally right. Cinema makes us feel and think, opening these crucial new horizons...

On one wall, I catch a familiar silhouette: the collector's box of Antonioni that I bought ten years ago, standing fiercely on the shelf.

With additional translation from Savunthara Seng.

◇ We couldn’t verify the identification of this film. If you find titles based on these descriptions, please write to us at margln@protonmail.com. The first right answer will get a free copy of MARGIN Issue 0.

∞ Ibid.